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Environment Department Distributes Emergency Response Test Kits to New Mexico Drinking Water Systems

(Santa Fe, NM) —The New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Drinking Water Bureau will distribute 147 emergency response test kits in the coming months to selected drinking water systems to help evaluate and identify potential contamination following human intrusions.

“These emergency response test kits are part of the Environment Department’s efforts to provide peace of mind when it comes to the state’s drinking water supply,” NMED Secretary Ron Curry said. “There is nothing more fundamental than ensuring the safety of our public drinking water.”

The test kits are designed based on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. Each kit can perform an airborne radiological screening and a water contamination assessment for chlorine residual, cyanide, pH, and conductivity.

After an intrusion, water system managers can first use the radiation meter to screen the area for airborne radiological contaminants. If the site is safe, the managers can then test the water for cyanide, conductivity, PH and chlorine residual and compare the results to historical, baseline results. If there is a significant difference from baseline levels, water system contamination could be indicated.

Physical evidence gathered at the site and the results of this initial testing could indicate what additional laboratory analyses should be performed, such as tests for heavy metals, volatile organic compounds, toxicity, etc., at a certified laboratory.

Drinking water systems receiving a kit agree to assist other smaller, nearby water systems in case of an intrusion. This will provide water systems statewide with an initial, emergency testing capability in case of a potential water contamination incident anywhere in New Mexico.

The New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH), Epidemiology and Response Division, Office of Health Emergency Management (OHEM) as a part of an ongoing collaborative effort with NMED to protect public health provided funding for the purchase of the kits. OHEM creates and develops programs dedicated to awareness, prevention, preparedness, response and recovery for the public, first responders, medical personnel, hospitals, and special-needs populations within New Mexico.

Intrusions to drinking water systems throughout New Mexico are a concern to the Governor's Office of Homeland Security, New Mexico Department of Public Safety, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, and local law enforcement agencies. In the past, intrusions have been the result of vandalism and not terrorists probing the system. However, drinking water system intrusions are taken seriously and each one is thoroughly investigated.

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